Chapter I

THE COMMUNITY OF BANG CHAN

The Geographical Setting

In the populous flat central plain of Thailand where Bang Chan was located, fenceless geometric rice-fields, dotted by clumps of trees, stretch as far as the eye can see. Houses, clustering occasionally into hamlets, line the canals that serve for domestic use, drainage, irrigation, and communication. A few mounded-up roads lead out from Bangkok, the national capital on the Menam Chao Phraya, the great central river.

The monsoon divides the year into three seasons: a hot and wet (late May through November); a cool and dry (December to mid-February); and a hot and dry (late February to mid-May). The temperatures range annually from 59° to 89° F. (15° to 32° C.) with monthly means of 77° to 86° F. (25° to 30° C.) (de Young:5). A drop at night averages around 18° F. (10° C.) in April, and 22° F. (12° C.) in January, while the relative humidity varies between 85 per cent and 81 per cent (Hauck, et al.:12). Rainfall averages about 50 inches a year, 40 of which fall in the wet season (Janlekha:21). Because of the run-off from the mountains in the north, once a year the Menam Chao Phraya slowly rises, fills the canals and then overflows its banks, covering the plain for hundreds of miles to a depth of three feet or more. In Bang Chan, the water stood on the land from June until January, with its peak in October. From February to May the canals ran low, and the land dried and cracked from the intense heat.

The Community

In 1954, 1700 persons (336 families) lived in Bang Chan. Muslims, comprising 10 per cent of the population, lived as fully Thai citizens in all parts of the community in economic and social symbiosis with Buddhists. A few ethnic Chinese had married into Thai families and were accepted.

The community spread over an area of about 7000 rai (1000 hectares or 5 square miles). Bang Chan Canal bissected

Bang Chan Canal bissected the community and joined, about one mile south, Sēnsēab Canal, a broad old waterway connecting Bangkok and Minburī with the canal network of the central plains. A well-raised, year-round road which ran between Bangkok, 20 miles to the southwest, and Minburī, two miles east, cut through one side of the area. On it lay Bang Khūat, another community, about eight kilometers from Bang Chan (cf. Kaufman:1960), and a cluster of houses called "Kilō paet," (Kilō 8) both west of Bang Chan and nearer to Bangkok. A shallow canal flanked this road most of the way.

The town of Minburī with district offices, shops, and pharmacists, and a good-sized Muslim population was well-known to most of the residents of Bang Chan. Its middle school drew from the surrounding farming countryside, including Bang Chan, those few pupils whose educational aspirations led them beyond the local elementary school. Minburī had electricity, but no telephone or telegraph facilities.

For nine months of the year, while Bang Chan lay under water, most of the marketing was done through boat-venders who plied the canals. During the dry months, or for large festivities, people marketed at Minburī, Kilō paet, or in Bangkok.

The Thai government administered Bang Chan through two district offices (amphoe), one located in Minburī, the other in Bangkapi, close to Bangkok. The common boundary of their respective districts happened to run through the middle of the community. Seven local head men, each in charge of one of the seven hamlets (mūban) into which the entire community was divided reported to one or the other district office. They transmitted instructions from their superiors to the farmers, maintained order mostly by their personal prestige, and kept the village census more or less up to date by recording and reporting marriages, births, and deaths.

At the center of the community was the cherished Buddhist temple with its abbot, monks, and novices, numbering 15 to 50 depending on the season. The elementary public school, occupying one of its buildings,[1] was attended by 300 children aged eight to fifteen, both Buddhist and Muslim. The temple compound was surrounded by a number of houses, including a cafe and stalls for small vendors. A small country mosque (sureo) in another hamlet was the religious center for the Muslim minority, some of whose children attended another school just outside the Bang Chan community. The abbot and the imam, the respective local heads of the two religious faiths, were of importance in the community as leaders.

1. A new large school has since been built away from the temple compound.

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Bangkok. The tropical monsoon climate divides the year into three seasons, a hot, wet season from late May to November, a cooler, dry season from December to early February, and a hot, dry season from late February to mid-May. The community, scattered over an area of approximately five square miles, was composed of seven neighboring hamlets. In 1954, the population was approximately 1700, divided among 336 households. About 60 per cent of the households were made up of independent families, parents with unmarried children, with an average family size of 5.7 persons. The main occupation of 80 per cent of all families was rice farming.

The climate together with the overflowing Chao Phraya river, provided natural conditions for raising a single crop of wet rice. From May or June to February, the principal activities were those connected with rice production. This crop greatly exceeded the needs for local consumption as human food, feed, and seed. The surplus of rice which was sold, was estimated for 1953 as 1.4 times the amount used for all purposes within the village (Janlekha, 1955).

Wat Bang Chan, the Buddhist monastery and place for religious exercises, was also the center of social life in the community. When data for this study were being gathered, the one primary school in the village was located on the grounds of the wat. The community was defined simply by the clientele which patronized Wat Bang Chan and this elementary school. Within the area of the community lived a small minority of Thai Moslems who patronized a mosque and school just outside Bang Chan. The few Chinese in the village were considered as part of the Thai-Buddhist community. Information to be presented on food habits refers primarily to habits of the Buddhist majority, although some reference will be made to ways in which Moslem practices differed therefrom.

Although for six or more months of the year the fields were covered with water, sometimes to a depth of a meter or more, a year-round road, connecting Bangkok and Minburi, the nearest market town, ran through one edge of the village. Bus service was available along this road, to either Bangkok or Minburi but within the community one went by boat on the network of canals during the wet season, and during the dry season, on foot along the dikes or across fields. From late January through May, when subsidiary canals were apt to be dry, getting about was somewhat difficult. Boat travel was considered easy, but as many families had only one boat, a trip to the store or even to a neighbor's home had to be planned with reference to the activities of other family members.

Large scale purchases, as for a ceremony, were always made at a big market, but in general, instead of people going to the market-town, the "market" came to the people. Boat-venders brought not only fresh produce and staples but also sweets, ices, soft drinks, and cooked foods such as Chinese

4:Phillips E-4,5 (1956-1957) 1966
AO7 Central Thai AO7
Bang Chan
Thailand AO1

[P. 14]

I

The Village of Bang Chan

Geographical and Cultural Setting

The heartland of Siam is the Mɛ̀ɛnaam or Caw Phrajaa Valley, a vast alluvial plain stretching out for some 250 miles north of the Gulf of Thailand and the capital city of Bangkok, where approximately 40 percent of the nation's 26.3 million persons (1960) live.[1] This Central region is distinguished geographically, and to a lesser extent culturally, from the three other major areas of Thailand: the North, a forested mountain area dominated by Chiengmai, Thailand's second largest city, and in whose outer reaches live many of the tribal peoples of Siam; the Northeast, a broad plateau region which is the largest and economically poorest area of the country; and the South, or Peninsular Thailand, a jungle and mountain area where the heaviest concentration of Thai Malay–Moslems live.

The community of Bang Chan is located some 31 kilometers northeast of Bangkok on what is essentially a flat, seemingly endless rice field, broken occasionally by tall Asiatic pines, strings of houses along canals, or clumps of trees shielding some isolated homesteads. A person seeing Bang Chan for the first time is struck particularly by the intense green of the landscape and, once off the macadam road that connects the village to Bangkok and to the market town of Minburi four kilometers to the east, the stillness of the setting, even along the thickly populated main canal where voices are muffled by the heavy foliage surrounding each house. Often in the early hours of the afternoon the only sound that one can hear in Bang Chan is the dip of the paddles of boats moving up the canal or the barking of dogs.

[1] There is no general agreement on the precise boundaries of the Mɛ̀ɛnaam Valley. Zimmerman (1931), Andrews (1935), Blanchard *et al.* (1958), and most Thai government documents use the term synonymously with "Central region," which would include the provinces east and southeast of Bangkok to the Cambodia frontier, west to the Burma border, and north of the Gulf of Thailand. Credner (1935) and deYoung (1955) on the other hand limit the term to only that portion of the Central region which falls north of Bangkok, equivalent to what Pendleton (1962) calls the "Bangkok Plain." Our population figure refers to the former usage.

4:Phillips E-4,5 (1956-1957) 1966
AO7 Central Thai AO7
Bang Chan

Houses in the village vary considerably in appearance: from the bamboo and thatch dwellings of the poorest families to the sturdy, great gabled houses of teak built by Bang Chan's original settlers to the tiled and corrugated iron-roofed homes of the newly rich. Most, however, follow the traditional Siamese pattern of being built on posts two to ten feet off the ground, mainly as a protection against flood waters. Many homes in Bang Chan give the impression of being permanently unfinished, the bamboo houses because they require constant refurbishment, the wooden dwellings because they are made of teak which seasons best when left untreated and exposed directly to the elements. The merging upper-class urban pattern of painting teakwood has not yet reached Bang Chan.

The major thoroughfare of the community, bisecting it in a north-south direction and perpendicular to the Bangkok-Minburi highway, is Khlɔɔŋ (or Canal) Bang Chan, which links with Khlɔɔŋ Sɛɛn Sɛɛb three kilometers south of the village. The latter, dug in the 1840's and originally intended as a military route to the Cambodian frontier, is one of several major canals dug during the mid-nineteenth century as part of the vast canal system that was constructed in the Central Plain when the region was opened for commercial rice production. Together with the highway built since World War II, a one-hour bus ride to the capital, Khlɔɔŋ Sɛɛn Sɛɛb, provides the villagers with their major access to Bangkok and the rest of the Central Plain. By motorboat a trip to Bangkok via this large, bustling canal takes approximately three hours.

Despite these relatively good communications facilities and the long-standing Thai peasant tradition to *paj thiaw* ("to go around"—for fun, on visits, pilgrimages, often for long distances) few people outside the immediate vicinity of the village have ever heard of Bang Chan. The community is neither a landmark nor is it located near one; it is not famed for any activities (other than having become the research site for the "American professors"); and because it is not a spatially integrated village, Bang Chan cannot even be found on any map of Thailand. Like most Thai settlements, Bang Chan has a Buddhist monastery and a government elementary school. It is these two structures that give the village its identity and the local people a sense of belonging to a community. People say that they live "at home in Bang Chan" because they make their merit at the monastery of Bang Chan and send their children to the Bang Chan school. Approximately five square miles in size and inhabited by 1,771 people living in 296 households (1956 village census), Bang Chan seems in physical appearance and social significance like the thousands of other communities that dot the rice fields of the great Central Plain.

To what extent Bang Chan may be considered "typical" in an analytic sense of other villages of the Mɛɛnaam Valley, or even of the country as a

BANG CHAN

FOREWORD

114 The Cornell Thailand Project, like other Cornell University studies in community development, is a long term investigation in the field of the processes involved in changing cultural behavior in a non-industrialized society. Field research was begun in 1948 in the central plain of Thailand with base line studies of the rice farming community of Bang Chan and its environs. A collaborating staff of Thai and Americans representing different disciplines has continued to work in Thailand at Bang Chan and elsewhere in a series of phases extending to the present.

[113] The first interim report issued by the Project gives a general account of the economic, political and social organization of Bang Chan in 1948-49 together with some material on [128] health and diet (Sharp et al., 1953). Since the circulation of this first interim report was limited, some of the salient characteristics of Bang Chan should be outlined here.

361 Bang Chan is located some twenty roadmiles northeast of Bangkok, the rapidly growing major metropolis and capital of Thailand. The village is between two and three miles west of a small district administrative center and market town, [487] Minburi. A century-old canal and to the north of it a post-war hard surface road connect Minburi and Bangkok so that [491] villagers have easy access to these two centers by boat or bus.

621 In 1954, when data for the present study were still being 162 gathered, the population of Bang Chan was about 1700, divided among about 300 households. Roughly 60 per cent of the house- [592] holds were made up of independent nuclear families consisting of parents and unmarried children. The average size for all 243 families was 5.7 persons. Rice farming was the main occupa- 241 tion of 80 per cent of all families. The population in 1954 worked and lived on about 2800 acres (7000 rai) of land. With [463] the exception of some 120 acres (300 rai) used for the home [311] sites and home gardens scattered along the network of canals in the village, all land was devoted to the cultivation of wet rice. Nutritional density is thus practically the same as population density. Of the rice crop, 60 per cent or more may be sold, the remainder providing seed, feed, and the staple [132] food of the people. During the wet season and into the cooler 221 dry season, from May or June to February, the growing of the [517] single crop of rice is the main activity. The hot dry season from March until the rice planting begins again is a period of fiestas, ceremonies, and visiting.

621 The Thai countryside is divided into hamlets, each with [622] a headman in charge of the thirty to sixty households of the [128] hamlet. Seven such hamlets constitute the Bang Chan community. (In the Project studies they are identified by the initials BC and KY followed by a number).

7: Janlekha X-4,5 (1948-1953)p956 AO7 Central Thai AO7
Bangchan

MAP I

131
103
102
634
361
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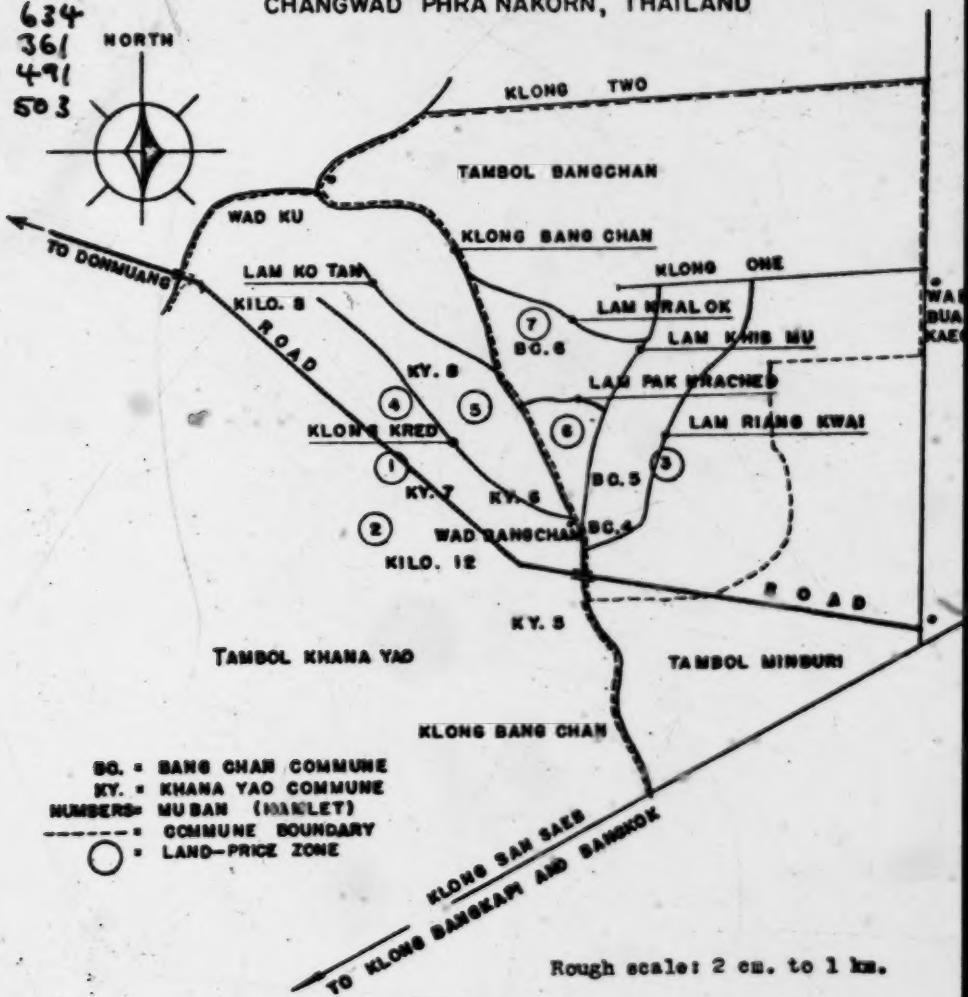
SKETCH MAP OF TAMBOL KHANA YAO, AMPHOE BANGKAPI
AND TAMBOL BANGCHAN, AMPHOE MINBURI
CHANGWAD PHRA NAKORN, THAILAND



Rough scale: 2 cm. to 1 km.